

Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League

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League Calls for Ban on Fracking in Public Forests

Today in a letter to the United States Forests Service, The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) released a statement calling for a ban on all hydraulic fracturing and oil and gas development activities in national forests, as well as restricted use of timber harvest and production, chemical treatment, and prescribed burning, with special protections for designated Wilderness Areas. The statement by BREDL's Executive Director, Lou Zeller, was submitted to the Forest Supervisor for the National Forests of North Carolina, Kristin Bail, in response to the public comment period for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests 15 Year Plan Draft Revision. The final plan will determine the standards, outcomes and desired conditions for Nantahala and Pisgah Forests, which together span over one million acres in western NC along the Appalachian Mountains in eighteen counties.

The League with its Burke County chapter, Save Linville Gorge Wilderness, ask that the Forest Service regulate and restrict all commercial activities in the forests that will have negative health impacts for the ecosystem and surrounding communities. In the comments submitted by BREDL, specific demands include the following provisions:

- The plan for Pisgah and Nantahala must expressly prohibit fracking and all oil and gas development activities.
- Commercial biomass fuel should be expressly prohibited as a standard in the plan revision.
- Toxic chemicals should be banned in ecologically sensitive and highly-trafficked management areas. Further research is needed in the area of invasives and pest control.
- Prescribed burning, chemical herbicide and pesticide uses should be prohibited in Wilderness Areas and Wilderness Study areas. All proposed Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas under the draft plan online mapping tool should be included and receive this designation.

Kate Dunnagan, who works for BREDL as a NC Community Organizer and Development Director, attended several of the meetings hosted by the Forest Service in 2014 and has studied the draft plan proposed by the Forest Service as well as the online mapping tool, available on the National Forest of North Carolina's website. "The Forest Service is asking for input from the public on specific management areas, such as recreation, timber production and harvest, research, and wilderness

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preservation,” Dunnagan states. “The draft plans fails to include provisions that would ban hydraulic fracturing and other oil and gas production in Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests. The Forest Service must specifically prohibit these activities in the fifteen year plan revision, as this issue is very pressing and timely in NC, and other National Forests including George Washington in VA, have already been opened to fracking.”

The League and its chapters are asking that in addition to banning fracking in the Nantahala and Pisgah Forests, the Forest Service explicitly prohibit activities that endanger these forests and the surrounding communities including biomass fuel production, chemical treatment, and prescribed burning, particularly of designated Wilderness Areas. One of BREDL’s locally based chapters that has been working to block a proposed prescribed burn plan for the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area has also weighed in on the public comment period, which ended today. In her comments, Susan Crotts, co-chair of the Save Linville Gorge chapter of BREDL based in Jonas Ridge, states that, “We are pleased to see that the Forest Service staff has considered the input from people opposed to using prescribed fire in the Linville Gorge Wilderness and has not made burning wilderness a policy guideline in the developing plan revision.” However, according to Crotts, the plan does not adequately prohibit prescribed fire in the National Forests, which produce air quality contaminants such as particles and gaseous chemicals including formaldehyde, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, hydrochloric acid, and other known and suspected carcinogens.

Crotts’s statement also highlights the need to regulate the application of chemical treatments such as herbicides and pesticides, such as glyphosate and triclopyr which are known endocrine disruptors and is cause a particular threat to amphibians and large herbivores. According to the EPA, prolonged exposure to glyphosate can result in reproductive effects in humans, as well as kidney damage and congestion of the lung. According to recent studies, herbicides which are now used by the Forest Service treat the spread of invasive species are also linked to rising rates of autism in children. BREDL is calling for more research in the area of invasive and pest control, and good governance practices to determine the safety of chemical application, such as buffer zones around homes, schools, towns, drinking water, and the headwaters of rivers.

The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League is a regional, community-based, non-profit environmental justice organization. BREDL was founded in 1984 as a result of community grassroots organizing in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina and Virginia, where local residents opposed the planned construction of a high-level nuclear waste dump in the region by the US Department of Energy. The League’s founding principles are earth stewardship, environmental democracy, social justice, and community empowerment.

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